

# THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE FORUM

Volume 2, Number 6

June, 1989

## The Soviet-Japanese Territorial Dispute

by Hiroshi Kimura

World War II ended forty-four years ago, yet there still has not been a peace treaty signed between Japan and the Soviet Union. The stumbling block is what the Japanese call the "Northern Territories" (Hoppô ryôdo) problem, or the question of sovereignty of the Northern Territories — the Habomais group of islets and the islands of Shikotan, Kunashiri and Etorofu off the northern coast of Hokkaido. Tokyo has long demanded the return of these islands, which Soviet troops occupied at the end of World War II. Moscow has flatly rejected such a request.

Moscow argues that at the Yalta Conference in February 1945, Stalin obtained approval from Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill to seize these islands (together with the Kurile islands and South Sakhalin) in exchange for Soviet entry into the war against Japan. From late August through early September 1945, Soviet troops occupied the islands, and subsequently the Soviet government incorporated them into the territory of the USSR. Ever since, the Soviet position has been that there is no territorial issue between Japan and the USSR.

Tokyo argues that since Japan was not party to the Yalta conference of Allied leaders, it is not bound by the agreement. Japan renounced the Kuriles in the San Francisco Peace Treaty of 1951, but has never given up its claim to these four islands. The Japanese consider the islands their own inherent (koyûno) territories — land that is regarded both historically and legally as part of Japan.

### Shevardnadze's Visit

December 18 to 21, 1988, Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard A. Shevardnadze paid his second visit to Tokyo to attend the eighth regular Soviet-Japanese foreign ministerial conference. His visit to Japan was overdue, primarily because of the cold

political climate produced in Soviet-Japanese relations by a series of events and incidents during 1987, including the Toshiba machinery case. It had been nearly three years since his last visit.

Expectations on the Japanese side ran high. During the three-year interlude, the Soviet Union under Gorbachev had made some political-diplomatic "concessions" to the West, sometimes of a unilateral nature. These included the agreement to dismantle all SS-20s (encompassing those deployed in the Asian theater), the announcement of the Soviet military's withdrawal from Afghanistan, and discussions on the Kampuchean question. In his foreign relations priority list, Gorbachev appears to be moving gradually from preoccupation with the United States to a more Euro- or Asian-centered orientation. Many Japanese are also well aware that *perestroika* has run into serious difficulties (such as inflation and shortages in consumer goods and foodstuffs), thus creating a need for active economic intercourse with Japan, an economic superpower.

In fact, the Soviets seem to be slightly more conciliatory with regard to the debate on the "Northern Territories." Starting approximately in July 1988, some Soviet scholars and even some foreign policy advisers began to say that since Tokyo does not share the Soviet position, the Soviets may recognize the existence of the territorial issue.<sup>1</sup> In late September and early October of 1988, Gorbachev conducted a large personnel reshuffle, which included the retirements of Andrei Gromyko (78), Anatolii Dobrynin (68) and Ivan Kovalenko (70). The retirement or demotion of Kovalenko — who had been the deputy chief of the International Department of the CPSU's Central Committee, who supervised for decades the Party's policies and affairs concerning Japan, and whose name had been identified in Japan with Soviet inflexibility — appeared

1 Gilbert Rozman, "Soviet and Japanese Mutual Perceptions," an unpublished paper.





to many Japanese to symbolize the changing trend in Soviet policy toward Japan.

Despite high expectations, there were no breakthroughs in the three rounds of meetings between Shevardnadze and his counterpart Sôsukey Uno in Tokyo in December 1988. Shevardnadze did not *officially* acknowledge the existence of the territorial dispute. Commenting that "the Soviet position on the territorial issue did not show any change at all," Japanese Foreign Ministry officials concluded: "In this regard, there was no substantial progress."

On closer inspection, however, there were several interesting developments at the conference. These include: 1) The Soviet Union agreed to negotiate a peace treaty with Japan; 2) It acknowledged *virtually*, although not officially, the existence of the territorial issue; 3) Both Japan and the Soviet Union agreed to set up a permanent working group to further promote negotiation on a peace treaty.

## Real Peace Treaty or Substitute?

The Shevardnadze-Uno talks marked one step forward for Japan because the Soviet Union showed its willingness to conclude a peace treaty rather than a substitute for a peace treaty. Such a seemingly simple thing is significant to Japan.

Without a peace treaty, Japan and the USSR have not put an end to the formal state of war.<sup>2</sup> Even the standard Soviet textbook, *International Law*, edited by the Institute of Law of the USSR Academy of Sciences, holds this view, stating that "a peace treaty legally ends the state of war between two signatory states, thereby establishing political and other relations."<sup>3</sup> Both the Soviets and the Japanese appear to assume that a peace treaty would include a clause on the settlement of the territorial or border question. In his interview with Shôryû Hata, then editor-in-chief of *Asahi Shimbun*, the late General Secretary Leonid I. Brezhnev stated on June 5, 1977: "There is no need to say that a peace treaty usually includes questions dealing with broad matters, including the border issue."<sup>4</sup>

To make the issue more complicated, there is a difference between the "border issue" and "the territorial question." The "border issue" Brezhnev and other Soviet leaders refer to is almost undoubtedly nothing but the boundary supported by the Soviets but rejected by Japan. What is meant by the "territorial question," on the other hand, is Japan's claim that the present

boundary demarcating Japan and the Soviet Union is unfounded, illegal, and subject to negotiation.

The Soviet Union under Brezhnev had been tenaciously pursuing a strategy aimed at achieving a breakthrough in Soviet-Japanese relations by obtaining some sort of treaty agreement or legal document from Tokyo which could somehow substitute for a peace treaty. The conclusion of such a legal document between the Soviet Union and Japan would serve two important functions. One is a political function, that is to say, a legal document can serve as a useful lever to artificially build a "solid treaty basis" (*prochnaiadogovornaia osnova*)<sup>5</sup> on which the road to further development of Soviet-Japanese relations can be paved. Such a document could help "to bring the bilateral relations up to a higher level and render them stable."<sup>6</sup> N. Nikolaev, a Soviet specialist on Japanese relations, did not conceal his expectation that a treaty would also serve a creative function, claiming that "such a document would *create* the atmosphere of deep confidence necessary for the development of good business-like relations between these two countries."<sup>7</sup> (Emphasis added.) Another related reason for concluding a legal document is its potential propaganda role. Once a treaty is concluded between Moscow and Tokyo, it would symbolize a major breakthrough in the current impasse, thereby publicizing the improvement in relations to the entire world.

Whatever function a legal document with Japan may be intended to serve, nobody can deny the fact that previously the Soviet Union, particularly under Brezhnev, had been doing its utmost to sell the idea of such a substitute treaty. Brezhnev's proposal for an Asian collective security scheme was obviously one such attempt. For Tokyo, an especially disturbing aspect of this Soviet scheme was that the principle calling for "respect for inviolability of national borders" would serve, as the Helsinki Final Act in fact did in Europe, to consolidate Moscow's position of the territorial *status quo* and undermine Tokyo's claims to the northern islands.<sup>8</sup>

Moscow's 1978 proposal of a Soviet-Japanese Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation<sup>9</sup> was another attempt to have a "substitute" treaty arrangement with Tokyo. Such a proposed treaty was expected to serve the Soviet Union as an artificial lever to break its deadlock with Japan and to pave the way for new developments, particularly when the People's Republic of China was about to succeed in concluding a peace treaty with Japan. This intention was clearly evident in the

2 L. Oppenheim, *International Law: Treaties, War and Neutrality*, Vol. II (London: Longmans, Green and Co. Disputes, 1952), p. 605.

3 *International Law*, USSR Academy of Science, Institute of Law, translated into Japanese by Kaoru Yasui, et. al., *Kokusaihô*, 2 (Tokyo: Nihon-hyôron-sha, 1963), p. 295.

4 L. I. Brezhnev, "Otvety na voprosy glavnogo redaktora gazety *Asakhi* S. Khata," *Leninskim kursom: Rechi i stat'i*, Vol. 6 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1978), p. 415.

5 V. Dal'nev, "Chto meshaet razvitiu sovetsko-iaponskikh otnoshenii," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 1, (January 1978), p. 52; S. Modenov, "Tokio v farvater politiki Vashingtona," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, No. 5 (April 1981), p. 67; *Pravda*, April 14, 1982.

6 Modenov, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

7 N. Nikolaev, "Dobrososedstvo i sotrudnichestvo — v interesakh SSSR i Iaponii," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'* 1 (1978), p. 52.

8 Alexander O. Ghehardt, "The Soviet System of Collective Security in Asia," *Asian Survey*, No. 13 (December 1973), p. 1579; Arnold L. Horelick, "The Soviet Union's Asian Collective Security Proposal: A Club in Search of Members," *Pacific Affairs*, No. 47 (Fall 1974), p. 282; Alfred Biegel, "Moscow's Concept for Collective Security in Asia," *Military Review*, No. 57 (February 1977), p. 10.

9 *Izvestiia*, June 25, 1978.



following statement by Iurii Vdovin, then Tokyo correspondent for *Pravda*: "The Soviet Union has in fact repeatedly demonstrated its preparedness to develop and deepen its relations with Japan. A good basis for this could become a Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation...The conclusion of such a treaty would *elevate the relations* between the two countries to a new level and *open the perspectives for the further development* of broad relations in various fields."<sup>10</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in the Far East are also designed to function as a political instrument of diplomatic change directed at breaking a major impasse in relations between Japan and the Soviet Union, although they are not necessarily designed to be a bilateral treaty between Japan and the USSR.<sup>11</sup> CBM's, established as part of the 1975 Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) at Helsinki, are aimed at reducing the danger of armed conflict caused by miscalculation or misunderstanding through an exchange of observers during military maneuvers, prior notification of major military movements and visits by military delegations. Moscow would benefit greatly from CBMs with Japan both in symbolic terms and in a concrete political and economic sense. CBMs in the Far East were first announced by Brezhnev in 1981.<sup>12</sup> Andropov and Chernenko renewed these proposals, as did Gorbachev early on.<sup>13</sup>

The Soviet CBM proposal, as well as the Asian collective security system and the Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation, are viewed by Japan as substitutes for a peace treaty. That Moscow needs a substitute is obvious from these repeated overtures, the most notable of which was Brezhnev's reply letter to the group of Japanese writers protesting against nuclear weapons. It reads: "We see no obstacle to beginning an exchange of opinions with Japan either within the framework of the proposal... on CBMs in the Far East or *in any other form* (*v liubykh drugikh formakh*) acceptable to both sides."<sup>14</sup> (Emphasis added.)

In this light, Shevardnadze's readiness to negotiate toward a peace treaty with Japan — an attitude clearly noted during his second visit — must be considered as a favorable development. It is true, of course, that in the previous two Japanese-Soviet communiqués issued during the Gorbachev era, as in the communiqués issued during the Brezhnev period, mention was also made that "both countries would continue their negotiations on the conclusion of a peace treaty." Despite

these pledges, however, the Soviet Union tended to evade negotiations. Andrei Gromyko sometimes arbitrarily postponed or cancelled visits to Tokyo, and even under Gorbachev the Soviet Union tried to sell substitute treaties. Now Moscow appears to have finally decided to negotiate more seriously. The communiqué signed by both foreign ministers stated clearly: "The two ministers conducted negotiations on the conclusion of a *peace treaty*."<sup>15</sup> (Emphasis added.) Establishment of a working task force to promote negotiation, a point which was agreed upon in talks between Shevardnadze and Uno, may be also cited as an illustration of a shift in Soviet attitude.<sup>16</sup>

## ***De Facto Acknowledgement of the Territorial Problem***

Since the accession of Mikhail S. Gorbachev to power, the Soviet attitude toward the territorial dispute has begun to demonstrate a subtle change. Such a shift has been, in my view, undergoing distinct phases. In the first phase the Soviet government allowed Japanese spokespersons to express not only in its negotiations with Tokyo, but also in the Soviet media, the Japanese position that the territorial problem remained unsolved. For instance, during his first visit as Soviet Foreign Minister to Tokyo in January, 1986, Shevardnadze made it clear that, while he did not agree with the Japanese position, he did not prevent his counterpart, Shintarô Abe, from bringing it up.

The message of Japanese Ambassador Mutô Toshiaki to the Soviet Union (marking Emperor Hirohito's birthday on April 29, 1988), was more important, since it was addressed to the Soviet general public. Broadcast to the nation on *Vremia*, the main news program of the national television network, his address included the remark: "I would like to take this opportunity to stress again that our most important tasks are to solve the Northern Territories problem and conclude a peace treaty, the greatest pending issues in our postwar bilateral relations." This passage was broadcast in full, and for the first time the phrase "Northern Territories problem" was translated faithfully into Russian. It is possible to view this broadcast as a sign of *glasnost*, but in my view, more is involved. Even after Gorbachev's ascent to power, the Soviets had invariably deleted comments alluding to the northern islands in televised addresses by Japanese ambassadors. In Ambassador Katori Yasue's 1987 Emperor's birthday

10 *Pravda*, September 19, 1977.

11 Hiroshi Kimura, "The Soviet Proposal on Confidence Building Measures and the Japanese Response," *Journal of International Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Summer 1983), pp. 81-104.

12 *XXVI s'ezd kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuza: stenograficheskiy otchet* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1981), Vol. 1, p. 46.

13 For example, *Pravda* wrote on June 22, 1985: "The Soviet Union is ready to apply the proposed CBMs to the sea-lanes such as the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. If Japan accepts the Soviet proposal, it will fit well in with her vital interests."

14 *Izvestiia*, March 1, 1982; *Pravda*, March 2, 1982.

15 *Pravda*, December 22, 1988.

16 *The Japan Times* and *Hokkai Times*, December 22, 1988.



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message, the appeal for efforts to “solve” the problems was arbitrarily changed into Russian as a call to “deliberate” the issue.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, in July 1988, former Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone delivered a speech at the Institute for World Economy and International Affairs (IMEMO), in which he stressed the argument of the Tokyo government. The complete text of his address — including his statement that “without solution of the Northern Territories problem and conclusion of a peace treaty, it is very difficult to expect a remarkable expansion of Soviet-Japanese ties” — was translated into Russian and published in the October 1988 issue of IMEMO’s major organ, *World Economy and International Affairs*.<sup>18</sup> Nakasone was also provided an opportunity to deliver another address on Soviet television, which again included mention Japan’s claim over the northern islands.

In October 1988, *New Times* (Novoe vremia), a Soviet weekly magazine on international affairs, carried an article which boldly advocated the need to inform the *Soviet general public* of the existence of the territorial dispute between these two neighboring countries and let them have a correct understanding of it. The author of the article, Leonid Mlechin, argued that without such information and understanding, Soviet diplomats and negotiators would find themselves in a weak position, compared with that of their Japanese counterparts, “who have the advantage of always being able to refer to the wishes of the people.”<sup>19</sup> The same article introduced a view expressed by Japanese professor Tsuneaki Satō, who said that if the Soviet Union wants to be a member of the Asia-Pacific region, it has to be realistic enough to pay to Japan, the leading nation in the region, “an entrance fee,” which clearly means concession on the territorial question.<sup>20</sup> In a December 1988 issue of *Ogonek*, editor-in-chief and “reformist” Vitalii Korotich conducted interviews with three Japanese politicians of the conservative ruling party (the Liberal Democratic Party, or LDP), Nakasone, Abe and Uno. Particularly notable is that the magazine published the following statement made by Abe: “When asked in 1973 by then Japanese Prime Minister Kakuei Tanaka whether the unsolved problems left over after World War II include the Northern Territories question, Brezhnev

answered ‘yes.’ The Japanese people remember this. However, the Soviet Union has since changed its position and begun to state that the territories problem does not exist. I think that now it is important for the Soviet Union to go back to its 1973 position.”<sup>21</sup>

During the second phase of this shift in attitude, Soviet scholars — but not party or government officials — came to acknowledge that the dispute over the islands exists as long as Japan insists that it does. The July 1988 issue of *International Affairs* (Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’), a monthly periodical of the Soviet Foreign Ministry, published a round-table symposium held in Moscow entitled “Vladivostok: After Two Years,” marking the most important turning point in this regard.<sup>22</sup> The participants in the symposium were specialists on the Asia-Pacific region from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MID) and leading institutes attached to the Soviet Academy of Sciences, including IMEMO, the Institute for USA and Canada (ISKAN), the Institute of Oriental Studies (IVAN), and the Institute for Far Eastern Studies (IDV). A variety of views, with nuanced differences, was detectable among participants. People from the Ministry of International Affairs, such as Igor Rogachev and Liudvig Chizov, kept to the more or less traditional position. In contrast, however, the majority of Soviet Asian specialists, centered in the Academy’s “think tanks,” expressed a flexible viewpoint in a candid fashion. With regard to Soviet-Japanese relations, institute specialists urged the Soviet leadership to recognize the existence of the territorial problem. For instance, Dmitrii Petrov, head of the Japan department of IDV, regarded the territorial question as “a major difficulty (*trudnost’*) on the bilateral level lying between Japan and the Soviet Union.”<sup>23</sup> In his interview with Japanese journalists at Vladivostok on October 10, Evgenii Primakov, director of IMEMO, stated: “Between the Soviet Union and Japan this problem does exist. The Japanese side has expressed its own view, whereas the Soviet side has expressed a viewpoint opposing it. Such a fact in itself constitutes a problem.”<sup>24</sup> Two weeks later in Tokyo, Primakov was quoted as saying that the Soviet leadership under Gorbachev understands sufficiently the fact that the territorial question unmistakably exists between the two countries.<sup>25</sup> It

17 *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, May 1, 1987.

18 Ia. Nakasone, “Zalozhit’ osnovy novogo mezhdunarodnogo soobshchestva,” *Mirovaia ekonomika i mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia*, No. 10, (October 1988), pp. 73-77. Also for a report on Nakasone’s visit to Moscow by the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which shows it was still taking an uncompromising position on the Northern Territories issue, see “SSSR-Iaponiia: Priem M. S. Gorbachevym Ia. Nakasone 22 iuliia 1988g.,” *Vestnik ministerstva inostrannykh del SSSR*, No. 16 (September 1, 1988), pp. 1-2.

19 Leonid Mlechin, “SSSR-Iaponiia: Politika — Iskusstvo vozmozhnogo,” *Novoe vremia*, No. 45 (November 4, 1988), p. 14.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

21 “Uchit’sia zhit’ vmeste,” *Ogonek*, No. 51 [3204] (December 17-24, 1988), p. 6.

22 “Vladivostokskie initsiativy: dva goda spustia,” *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn’*, No. 7 (July 1988), pp. 140-155.

23 “Vladivostokskie initsiativy,” p. 145.

24 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 3, 1988.

25 *Ibid.*, October 26, 1988. Although *Yomiuri Shimbun* revised this three days later, Masamori Sase, professor at the National Defense Academy and an informed expert on Soviet-Japanese relations, indicated that this revision was made not necessarily because of *Yomiuri Shimbun*’s acceptance of its own mistake but rather because of other, perhaps political, considerations. *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 29, 1988; Masamori Sase, “Hoppōryōdo mondai: Soren-nanka-setsu no shinshō bōdai” (The Northern Territories Problem — A View that the Soviet Union Has Become Flexible May Be an Exaggerated Interpretation), *Shokun* (January 1989), pp. 98-99.



would be wrong to consider Primakov as a private academic, since his influence upon Shevardnadze and Gorbachev seems significant. As a Soviet scholar put it, "he may be regarded an invisible member of the Soviet government."<sup>26</sup>

In late September and October of 1988, the third phase began: some Soviet semi-government and party officials joined scholars in admitting the Soviet need to negotiate with Tokyo on the territorial question. In September, *Izvestiia*, the daily news organ of the Soviet government, carried an article in which political observer Stanislav Kondrashov let it be known to Soviet readers that the "problem on the so-called Northern Territories constitutes a major stumbling block, which contributes to the USSR's cool relations with Japan."<sup>27</sup> During the Soviet-Japanese Round-Table Conference held October 13-15, 1988, Aleksandr Bovin, a political observer for *Izvestiia*, also stressed the need to hold talks on the Northern Territories.<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, Iurii Bandura, former Tokyo correspondent of *Izvestiia* and currently deputy director of *Moscow News*, underlined the need to acknowledge the existence of the territorial controversy and to discuss the issue with Japan. Writing for *Moscow News* in October 1988, he concluded: "Neither side can ignore the priorities of the other side... By clinging to the principle that 'silence is golden' [on the Northern Territories question], we only help those who oppose good-neighborly Soviet-Japanese relations."<sup>29</sup> In his interview with *Mainichi Shimbun* in January 1989, Bovin said "the Soviet Union ought to admit the existence of the territorial problem and announce its readiness to discuss the matter."<sup>30</sup>

The Soviet government has allowed Japanese politicians to address the Soviet general public on the dispute, Soviet scholars to acknowledge the existence of the debate, and some semi-party and government officials to join their "think tank" scholars. Although these developments may be related to *glasnost*, they could also be part of a gradual educational process designed by the government to show the public that improved ties with Japan are impossible without resolution of the territorial dispute. Still, the Gorbachev government has never formally admitted that there is a debate. All the statements cited above have been made in a private capacity, not through official channels. No one expects that the Soviets would make such an official statement unilaterally, thus depriving themselves of an important bargaining chip.

Observing these developments, the Japanese voiced hopes that Shevardnadze might become the first Soviet official to formally recognize the existence of the dispute. Such expectations proved to be overly optimistic. Yet in my personal judgement, the trip of the Soviet foreign minister to Tokyo in

December 1988 resulted in a virtual acknowledgement of the territorial issue.

One of the salient aspects of the meeting was that what was not said was more significant than what was said. In the first place, during the talks with Uno and other Japanese politicians, Shevardnadze did not repeat Moscow's previous position that the territorial question had already been solved. Furthermore, Shevardnadze did not propose a Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Cooperation or any other substitute for a peace treaty.

Secondly and perhaps more importantly, although he did not utter the precise term "territorial question," the Soviet foreign minister did allow an indirect expression to be inserted into the final communiqué, a term which virtually means the territorial question. The joint Japan-Soviet communiqué issued at the end of the talks referred to the territorial issue as a source of major "difficulties (*trudnosti*) existing in their bilateral relations." In the *International Life* symposium cited above, Petrov was precise enough in identifying the territorial problem as "a difficulty on the level of bilateral relations." When one compares these two expressions, one may conclude that "difficulty" is a euphemism for the territorial problem. There is evidence to support such an interpretation. In his reply to a question raised by a Japanese reporter at the Japanese National Press Club on December 21 as to the Soviet government's official position on the territorial question, Shevardnadze simply read faithfully the following part of the joint communiqué which he had just signed: "In the negotiations, the two sides expressed their respective understandings on the historical and political aspects relating to the elimination of *difficulties* existing in their bilateral relations."<sup>31</sup> (Emphasis added.)

Thirdly, in reporting the talks, Soviet television did not conceal that influential Japanese political leaders consider the Northern Territories question the major stumbling block. *Vremia* introduced the views expressed by four Japanese politicians, who stated unanimously that without the reversion of the islands to Japan, Soviet-Japanese bilateral relations would not be improved.<sup>32</sup> The Soviet government may have already started a quiet educational campaign to let the Soviet public know that in order to improve its relations with Japan, the Soviet Union might give up these islands. As a parallel, the announcement by the Soviet government of its military troop withdrawal from Afghanistan was not made suddenly, but after a careful preparatory period of psychologically preparing the Soviet public and military that the withdrawal was necessary. Such an educational process started in major Soviet

26 Public statement by Evgenii E. Kovrigin at the Institute of Economic Studies, Far Eastern Section of the USSR Academy of Sciences, made in a session at the 1988 national Convention of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS) in Honolulu, November 1988.

27 Stanislav Kondrashev, "SSSR: ATR," *Izvestiia*, September 23, 1988.

28 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 22, 1988.

29 Iurii Bandura, "Ostrye ugly 'kruglogo stola'," *Moskovskie novosti*, No. 44 (October 30, 1988), p. 5.

30 *Mainichi Shimbun*, January 4, 1989.

31 *Pravda*, December 22, 1988.

32 About ten days after the foreign ministers' meeting, *Izvestiia* carried an article in which Professor Sase ascribed the major reason for not concluding a peace treaty between Japan and the Soviet Union to the "unsolved territorial problem," listing the names of the four islands. *Izvestiia*, January 2, 1988.



newspapers with a letter from a mother worried about her son in Afghanistan.

Unfortunately, other interpretations are also possible. For instance, there could be a gap between Japan and the Soviet Union in what the term "difficulties" (*trudnosti*) means.<sup>33</sup> Needless to say, for the Japanese side the "territorial question" constitutes the single most important difficulty. But the Soviets have not been ready to accept such an interpretation yet. The "difficulty" could mean in the Soviet interpretation that which has prevented relations from improving — Japanese stubbornness on the territorial question. In order to issue the communiqué, a compromise was necessary. On the one hand, the Soviets agreed to write into the document the term "difficulties," without necessarily agreeing that the term means what the Japanese side suggests. On the other hand, the Japanese side apparently decided not to pursue the semantic question, hoping that the working group on a peace treaty would clarify that question in the very near future. But as a result of the compromise, there is still room for interpretation.<sup>34</sup>

## Establishment of the Working Group

The third interesting development of the foreign ministerial talks in Tokyo in December 1988 was the creation of a permanent working group at the vice-foreign minister level. The joint communiqué stipulates that the mission of the group is to "further promote negotiations on the conclusion of a peace treaty." Establishment of such a working-level task force is unprecedented in the recent history of Soviet-Japanese bilateral relations, and both Japan and the Soviet Union welcomed it. The Japanese consider it a sign of readiness by the Soviet side to conclude a peace treaty. Considering that the territorial question constitutes the major subject matter of this task force, not a few Japanese newspapers viewed the creation of the working group as the "greatest achievement" of the conference.<sup>35</sup>

The Soviet side was also positive. Having summarized the two-day talks with his Japanese counterpart as "one of the most fruitful (overseas) visits in recent years," Shevardnadze explained that "the mechanism for considering on a permanent basis the problem of a peace treaty between our countries is created. It is a mechanism through which the whole complex of problems, with which each of the two sides are concerned, will be discussed."<sup>36</sup> Three Soviet specialists on Asia and Japan highly praised "the creation of a joint working commission" (*sozdanie sovместnogo komissii*) in their inter-

view with the *Hokkaidō Shimbun*. Nikolai Shishilin of the CPSU's Central Committee stated that "at last an organizational working formula toward normalization of Soviet-Japanese relations has been discovered." Vladimir Lukin, Deputy Chief of the Department of Pacific and Southeast Asian Countries of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, went out of his way to say that "the group, which had been for long discussed within our Ministry, has finally been created by a Soviet initiative." Dmitrii Petrov also assessed the creation of such a task force, regarding it as a "quite important achievement" toward the normalization of bilateral relations.<sup>37</sup>

Because of the various possible interpretations over subject matter, for Japan such a working-level task force is a double-edged sword. It may certainly serve as a useful tool to promote the conclusion of a peace treaty. On the other hand, the establishment of such a group could provide Moscow with a good excuse for being late in reaching an agreement or even for shelving the territorial issue, by allowing the Soviets to argue that the group's discussion and conclusion has been delayed because of Tokyo's intransigent attitude. There is no guarantee that future discussion by the permanent working group will inevitably lead to progress on the territorial problem. Chances are that the Soviet Union will be extremely cautious about holding a meeting of the group, fearing that these talks will focus exclusively on the territorial issue. From such a perspective, it is an ominous sign that the task force is called a "permanent" (*postoiannaia*) working group.<sup>38</sup> As if confirming this apprehension on the Japanese side, the Soviet foreign minister was reported as saying to Takako Doi, Chairman on the Socialist Party of Japan, "It is hard to set a definite term to this group."

He was referring to a similar working group with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although the Sino-Soviet boundary talks started in 1964, they were repeatedly broken off or suspended. Only after the well-known speech of Gorbachev at Vladivostok on July 28, 1986, did the border talks between the PRC and the USSR accelerate. Even after the General Secretary acknowledged the principle that the main ship channel of the Amur River is the boundary between the USSR and the PRC, the Soviet Union has not yet accepted Chinese sovereignty of, for instance, Heixiazhi Island.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that the same man, Igor Rogachev, has been appointed to lead the working groups with both the PRC and with Japan.

33 *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 22, 1988.

34 Yoshikatsu Suzuki, "'Hoppō-ryōdō mondai' de rakkan wa sōkei (It is too premature to make a final assessment on the Northern Territories problem)," *Sekai Shūhō* (World Weekly), January 17, 1989, p. 22.

35 *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, December 20, 1988.

36 *Pravda*, December 22, 1988. Even in an article, published after the Conference, in which two authors from the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs maintained an inflexible position on the territorial dispute, they added their boss's positive assessment of the Conference at the end of the article. E. Prokhorov, L. Shevchuk, "O territorial'nykh pretensiakh Iaponii k SSSR," *Mezhdunarodnaia zhizn'*, p. 52.

37 *Hokkaidō Shimbun*, December 22, 1988.

38 *Pravda*, December 22, 1988.

39 For history of the Sino-Soviet border talks see, for example: Alan J. Day, ed., *Border and Territorial Disputes*, second edition, (Harlow: Longman, 1987), pp. 288-300; Thomas G. Hart, *Sino-Soviet Relations: Re-examining the Prospects for Normalization* (Aldershot: Gower, 1987), pp. 57, 74-77.



## Two Islands or Four?

It appears to me that under Gorbachev the Soviet Union has sent to Tokyo a relatively clear, albeit still unofficial, signal that the Soviet attitude and position is slowly changing. One ought not to presume that the Soviet Union is willing to give up the four islands. It is one thing for the Soviets to recognize the disputes over the islands, completely another for them to return them in practice to Japan. Not a single Soviet spokesman, including scholars, has ever expressed the USSR's willingness to return to Japan a single island, not to mention all four. And the likely Soviet admission of the existence of the territorial controversy serves the Kremlin's strategy of shelving the question. The same Soviet scholars who are realistic enough to consider the territorial issue as an obstacle for improving Soviet-Japanese relations have been lately sounding out Japanese reactions, unofficially proposing some compromise formulas. These include such proposals as Soviet-Japanese "joint possession" (*sovmestnoe vladenie*), the "leasing" of the islands to Japan, the "Senkaku (Diaoyudai) islands" solution.<sup>40</sup> On close inspection, most of them have one objective in common — Japan will be allowed jointly or unilaterally to use the territories, but the Soviet Union will retain legal ownership and sovereignty. Almost all of these proposals are aimed at shelving the territorial problem.

When it turns out that shelving the question does not work, the remaining options for the Soviet Union in terms of the number of islands to be returned are as follows: 1) the immediate return of two islands; 2) the immediate return of four islands; 3) some intermediate formula.

Regarding the "return of two islands" (the Habomais and Shikotan), the Soviets probably recognize that this formula or its variant would not work well. The majority of Japanese people would not be content with the return of the two smaller islands, which constitute only seven percent of the disputed area. Japan was offered such a compromise 33 years ago, in 1956, but turned it down. Since that time the Japanese have become more self-confident. One cannot ignore even the quiet rise of nationalism in Japan. In this regard, Harry Gelman seems to be correct when he writes: "The Japanese reaction would be negative... It was too late for such a partial concession; Japanese public opinion would no longer tolerate a deal that failed to return all four islands to Japan."<sup>41</sup> Consequently, no Japanese cabinet would dare make a deal to get back the two smaller islands and risk protest and social turmoil which might cost its own collapse.

Even if the Soviet Union succeeded in getting such a deal from Tokyo, it would not gain much. Active cooperation in trade, finance, management, and technology — the motivation for the Soviet Union to make concessions to Tokyo — would not result. What the Soviet Union wants from Japan is more than the signing of a legal document, but rather a fundamental change among the Japanese in their attitude toward the Soviet Union, from hitherto indifferent and cool to positive and cooperative. The mere signing of a piece of paper would not be very helpful to the economic difficulties facing Gorbachev. It is interesting to note that in his speech in Tokyo, Shevardnadze stated that what the Soviet Union wants to establish with Japan is "warm-hearted, good-neighborly, large-scale relations."<sup>42</sup> Concretely speaking, the Soviet Union wants a long-term, cheap-interest bank loan from the Japan Export-Import Bank, more active participation in joint enterprises and the "special economic zone" in the Soviet Far East by huge Japanese corporations, Tokyo's endorsement of the USSR's entry in the Pacific Economic Cooperation Committee (PECC), and so on.

I would speculate that the Soviet Union will eventually decide to return all four islands to Japan. What the Soviets may be considering now is what they would obtain from Japan if they agree to hand over all the islands. One Japanologist at IMEMO told me in a private conversation in early September 1988 in Moscow: "We are no longer debating among ourselves over the question of whether two or four islands ought to be handed over to Japan. What concerns us, however, is a question of whether, by our handing over the four islands to Japan, we could get an assured guarantee that Soviet-Japanese relations would be improved in a tangible fashion." Put bluntly, he and his colleagues want to know what *quid pro quo* the Soviets will receive. When Primakov, Rogachev, and other Soviet spokesmen have unanimously argued in recent years that it is Tokyo — which originally raised the territorial question — that ought to make a concrete proposal to Moscow, they sound as though they are probing what they would get in exchange for the islands.

If the Soviets agree to return all four islands, there are still variables as to what would be acceptable to Japan. For example, a combination of the return of two islands upon conclusion of a peace treaty and postponement of the decision on the remaining two for the next generation, the formula proposed by Mikhail Titarenko in February 1988, is unacceptable.<sup>43</sup> The return of two islands plus joint sovereignty over the other two would also be unsatisfactory. In contrast, the return of the four islands with the condition of their

40 For the "joint occupation" formula, see Georgii Knadze's "Sostoianie i perspektivy Sovetsko-iaponskikh otnoshenii," an unpublished paper read at the joint National Institute for Research Advancement (NIRA) and IMEMO conference, July 22-23, 1988 in Tokyo. For the "leasing" formula, see *Nihon Keizai Shimbun*, September 19 and 20, 1988; *The New York Times*, September 22, 1988. The Soviets have denied that they made a leasing proposal, even unofficially, *Izvestiia*, September 28, 1988. For the "Senkaku islands" formula, see *Yomiuri Shimbun*, October 26, 1988, *Sankei Shimbun*, October 29, 1988, *Pravda*, December 15, 1988, and A. D. Bogaturov, A. A. Nagorny, M. G. Nosov, "The Role of Japan in the US-Japan-USSR Triangles," unpublished paper read at the US-USSR joint conference, "Across the Pacific Triangle," November 16-18, 1988, at Lewis and Clark College, Portland, and also at the 19th AAASS Convention in Honolulu, November 20-22, 1988.

41 Harry Gelman, *The Soviet Military Leadership and the Question of Soviet Deployment Retreats* (Santa Monica: The Rand Corporation, 1988), p. 55.

42 *Pravda*, December 20, 1988.

43 *Asahi Shimbun*, February 8, 1988.



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demilitarization would be acceptable. And what I call the "Hong Kong formula" — the combination of return of two islands upon the conclusion of a peace treaty and return of the remaining two by a definite deadline, say 1999 — would also be good enough for Japan.

### Future Relations

If these observations are correct, the best way for Japan to get back the four islands is to assure Gorbachev's government of what the Soviet Union would gain from it. That can be worked out only at the bargaining table, but Japan would need to keep the following principles in mind: 1) Japan would take into consideration that these islands are currently populated by Soviet civilians and have Soviet military bases, the evacuation and withdrawal of which require time and expense; 2) Japan, with cooperation from the United States, would work to see that the strategic security of the USSR in the Sea of Okhotsk would not be threatened by transfer of the islands; 3) Japan would cooperate with the Soviet Union so that the return of the islands would not cause undesirable repercussions to the Soviet leadership either within or without the USSR; 4) the Japanese government would give a firm guarantee not to make any territorial request beyond the four islands; 5) Tokyo would make face-saving gestures in the wordings of a peace treaty (e.g., use the words "hand over" instead of "return" the islands), as well as in actions taken simultaneously by the Japanese government. (For instance, the Japanese government would provide the USSR with economic cooperation and financial assistance, but not in such a way that it looked like Japan was buying the Northern Territories).

If the territorial dispute is settled in a satisfactory fashion, what sort of a relationship could the USSR and Japan have? Tokyo, which has so far been taking a policy of "non-separa-

tion of economics from politics," could sign a long-term economic cooperation agreement with the USSR — following the example set by many West European countries — to facilitate more active trade and economic intercourse. The Japanese Export-Import Bank, a semi-governmental bank, could agree to loan huge amounts of long-term bank credit at low interest rates. With the official blessing of the Japanese government, private business in Japan could positively participate in joint ventures with the Soviets. Taken together, the chances are that Soviet-Japanese economic relations could be improved to the level of Sino-Japanese relations, which are now (in terms of the total trade in US dollars) three times bigger than the former.

Anti-Soviet feeling, prevalent among the Japanese, would be drastically reduced by return of the islands. An opinion poll conducted jointly by the *Asahi Shimbun* and Lou Harris in the wake of Gorbachev's visit to Washington, D.C. in December 1987 showed that out of five Western nations (West Germany, Britain, the US, France and Japan), the Japanese had the most negative responses when asked if the Soviet Union under Gorbachev was changing into a reliable country.<sup>44</sup> For most Japanese, the single most important yardstick of Gorbachev's program is the Northern Territories question.

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*The Harriman Institute Forum* is published monthly by

The W. Averell Harriman Institute for Advanced Study of the Soviet Union,  
Columbia University

Editor: Paul Lerner

Assistant Editors: Rachel Denber, Lolly Jewett

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ISSN Number: 0896-114X.

Subscription information: In the United States or Canada by first class mail: \$30 per year (\$20 per year for personal subscription by personal check). Outside the United States and Canada by airmail: \$40 per year (\$30 per year for personal subscription by personal check). Make check or money order payable to Columbia University and send to *Forum*,  
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